**The Black Locust and the Settle Farm**

Perhaps you have noticed Black Locust trees on the Sensory Trail in Sky Meadows State Park, leaning for a share of sunlight. In April, you can smell their sweet, drooping clusters of white flowers. But many of the locusts are starting to die and fall. Most started their lives here 60 to 70 years ago, and they have a story to tell about the history of this place.

Black Locusts are some of the first trees to take over open land when it is left fallow. We call them *pioneer* trees—the first in a succession of trees that move into fields or disturbed ground. The black locusts in this part of Sky Meadows State Park grew quickly with moisture from Adkins Rill and abundant sunshine. They show that open fields began to grow back into forest around 75 years ago. Why these fields were abandoned, we do not know, but the evidence is here in the trees.

Why are these trees now reaching the end of their lives? A black locust lives, on average, 60 years, though it has been known to reach the ripe old age of 100 years. Meanwhile, trees that begin life in the dappled shade under the black locusts, trees like oaks and hickories, grow slowly but steadily until they tower over the locusts and block their sun. Eventually, reaching the end of their life span and deprived of sun, the black locusts begin a steady decline.

Black Locusts can remain structurally sound for 100 years in the soil. And, they have the highest beam strength of any tree in Virginia’s forests. For this reason, the homes of the first European settlers in Jamestown, Virginia, were built on black locust poles. Black locusts were also important in the settlement of the Crooked Run Valley. Valuing their density and rot resistance, people on the Settle Farm used them to build fences and frame buildings. Today this species is still one of the most widely grown timber trees in the world.

Locusts are also a wonderful food and heating source. Their fragrant flowers in Spring call bees, who produce a wonderful Black Locust honey. The roots have a sweet licorice flavor. And a cord of seasoned locust wood has the same Btu potential as a ton of anthracite coal — the highest fuel value of any American tree.

What a marvelous tree –giving us clues about the land and sustaining us in so many ways.

Submitted by Laure Wallace